

## THE ROLE AND POSITION OF RELIGIOUS MYTHS OF BANTENESE SOCIETY AMONG THE RISING GENRES OF POPULER CULTURE

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### ABTRACT

*This article discusses various religious myths spread on several areas of Banten. How Bantenese society undertands and believes in religious myths that spread out and are still maintained from generations to generations becomes one of the main focuses of this article; besides, it also tries to analyze roles and functions of religious myths for Bantenese society and how is the position of these religious myths among the rising of populer culture in the society.*

*This article is a field research using ethnographical method based on anthropological perspective. To analyze the data, the researcher uses structural-functional approach. Library research, participant-observation, and depth-interview are methodes used to collect the data.*

*Myth is one of treasures of oral traditions that almost appears in every culture and every place of the societies all over the world, Banten is not exception. This oral tradition is frequently connected to the sacred and holy thing, and is frequently related to supernatural being that is logically difficult to observe and to understand, and it is also difficult to be proven scientifically. Moreover, its writer is often anonymous. Myth is considered having moral message and moral values. Hence, taking care of moral and attitudes become one of the functions of myth. Moreover, the belief and the conviction on it shows that modernity and the development of knowledge and information technology which is rapidly developed can not at moment's notice remove magical and mystical dimensions of the thoughts and behaviours of modern society. It is indicated by the facts that the belief and the conviction on myths are not only believed and practiced by laymen (ordinary people), but also by educated people.*

*Religious myths are one of Islamic literatures that still survive in Banten up to now. A few of these religious myths have ever been written and published both in fiction and non-fiction books. However, Many religious myths are*

*still stored in the collective memory of Bantenese society, especially the older people.*

*Even though popular cultures with various interesting accessories develop rapidly in Bantenese society, the existence of these religious myths, more or less, has influenced on the socio-religious life of the Bantenese. Religious myths, in some cases, also play significant roles and function for Bantenese society because they frequently contain moral values. Strengthening something, changing something, maintaing solidarity and unity among muslim societies, keeping prestiges and social status, guiding human behaviours are several roles and functions of religious myths for the Bantenese society.*

*Various religious myths are spread out and still believed and maintained from generations to generations in most of Bantenese society. Many of daily events and daily activities of Bantenese society are frequently covered by religious myths. The myths of the holy people or saints, sacred places, sacred objects (sacred cows), the parentage of villages, supernatural animals, supernatural beings, genie, and evil spirit are several kinds of religious myths that are often available in Bantenese society.*

**Keywords:** Religious Myth, Culture, Banten

## Introduction

Myth is a fiction story that exists in almost everywhere, in every era, in almost every society; and that it appears in many cultures. Many researches, especially conducted by the West researchers, show that myths always appear in various socio-religious activities of the society, especially in primitive society. Almost no society that is not covered by myths which have the sacred values for its adherents. Both primitive and modern societies often make use of the sacred myths as the symbols of strengthening and authority. In performing various socio-religious activities, indeed in conducting economic and political activities, there are always mythes emerged to make people convinced that what they believe has actually the sanctified values that could not be disparaged or destroyed.

Many experts argue that human, both individually and collectively, could not live without myths or mythologies. It means that the existence of myths is very vital and important for the existence of human life, especially dealing with religious myths and the belief systems. In this regard, Kluckhohn, as quoted by Roberts, argues that religious beliefs are usually expressed in the form of myths. By myth, the social

scientist does not mean untrue or foolish beliefs; myths have little to do with legends, fairy tales, or folk tales.<sup>333</sup>

The sociologists and anthropologists try to explain various definitions, meaning, and functions of myths. According to them, myths are considered as something needed by human to seek the intelligibility or the clarity about their realm as well as their origin history. Dealing with this, Roberts states that myths are stories or belief systems that help people understand the nature of the cosmos, the purpose and meaning of life, or the role and origin of evil and suffering.<sup>334</sup> Moreover, Madjid argues that myth is a kind of depictions on the realities that are unreachable by human both relatively and absolutely in the simplified format so that it can be understood and comprehended by many people. Due to only through an explanation that can be understood, someone or society is able to have a description on his position in the structure of cosmic so that human, based on such a description, can perform his life and conduct his activities.<sup>335</sup>

Myths, according to Tihami, are stories of nations, gods, and heroes in the past periods that contain interpretation on the origin of the nature, human, and nations that has deep meaning expressed magically.<sup>336</sup> Based on this interpretation, it seems that myths are the sacred and magical stories. We may also conclude that the origin of a community or a society can be revealed through myths existed in that society. We can know the history of a certain society or nation based on such myths; of course, the stories in myths will result in the historical facts that are different from those of explored through the historical researches that have the scientific historical data. This condition is caused by the fact that myths are generally expressed or transmitted orally and frequently expressed magically so that the contents of the myths could not be scientifically accounted for (justified). In this regard, Hunter, as quoted by Tihami, argues that myth is “*a sacred narrative explaining how the World and people came to be in their present form*”<sup>337</sup>. Definition stated by Hunter, in essentials, is similar to Tihami’s interpretation above that stresses on the sacred values of myths on how the World and society come to be in their present form.

Each region and each society has its own characteristics of myths that are unique one and another. Every society also has its own local religious myths which are believed by its people. Most of them believe that some myths are true stories that have been ever happened in the past. If we observe these local religious myths scientifically,

<sup>333</sup> Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Toronto: Wadsworth, 2006, 77

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>335</sup> Nurcholis Madjid, *Islam Agama Peradaban, Membangun Makna dan Relevansi Doktrin Islam dalam Sejarah*, 176.

<sup>336</sup> Gandung Ismanto (ed.), *Menemukan Kembali Jatidiri dan Kearifan Lokal Banten (Bunga Rampai Pemikiran Prof.Dr.HMA.Tihami,MA.,MM)* (Serang:Biro Humas Setda Prov.Banten, 2006), 36.

<sup>337</sup> Gandung Ismanto (ed.), *Menemukan Kembali Jatidiri dan Kearifan Lokal Banten (Bunga Rampai Pemikiran Prof.Dr.HMA.Tihami,MA.,MM)*, 36

we will result in a more complete treasure of local culture that can be used for exploring the local wisdom or world view of our society as a guidance of human in performing their socio-religious activities. Exploration of local religious myths from every area may result in a treasure of Indonesian culture that can be used to make Indonesian people aware of the existence of multiculturalism in our nation.

If we analyze several interpretations on religious myths from several areas, we can see how the Bantenese society understands myths as the sacred thing and frequently contains moral and religious values that should be maintained and conserved by the society in order that they can control their actions and behavior to be appropriate to their local culture and local wisdom.

Based on the explanation above, discussing on the role and position of religious mythes of Bantenese society among the rising genres of populer culture becomes an interesting topic to study because of several reasons: First, as a multicultural area consisted of people who dominantly speak in Sundanese and Javanese language and well-known as a religious area, Banten has various religious myths spread out among the society. Second, many religious myths in Banten are only kept in the collective memory of the older people. They will be extinct or lost by the rapidly rising genres of populer culture that is becoming more dominant in our country if they are not written and documented by us.

This article tries to discuss several main questions as follow: how Bantenese society undertands and believes in religious myths that spread out and are still maintained from generations to generations? What are the roles and functions of religious myths for Bantenese society?, and how is the position of these religious myths among the rising of populer culture in the Bantenese society?

### Theoretical concept of Myth

Some dictionaries defines myth as stories telling about the origin of the nature, gods, human, and many things in the World, and it deals with any magical action and supernatural beings happened in the past. In this regard, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* defines myth as ‘stories of a nation on gods and heroes in the past containing interpretation on the origin of the nature, human, nation that contains deep meaning expressed magically.’<sup>338</sup> Similar to this definition, *the Dictionary of Religious* also defines myth in the same point of view. This dictionary states that,

*“Myth is narrative, usually traditional, in which, events are described as deeds of god, heroes, or other super-human beings; i.e. events in the realm of nature*

<sup>338</sup> Tim Penyusun, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, cet.10, Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1998, 660-1

*or history are attributed to causes not acceptable in current scientific or historical explanation”.*<sup>339</sup>

Moreover, Salomon Reinach in *Orpheus: A History of Religions* defines myth as a collection of stories that is not found its author precisely (anonymous), but it is combined and spiced by actors who could not be subjected to check the truth of a history.<sup>340</sup>

Based on the definitions of the myth above, it can be concluded that myth is stories on gods, nature, human, or certain objects in which their truth cannot be scientifically verified, and its truth cannot be used to examine the history of a nation or a society because those stories are merely fiction that frequently contains something sacred and magical, and it is difficult to understand by logical reasoning.

Based on many literatures, explanation on myth is frequently connected to stories referred to the period of prehistory in which their authors or creators are anonymous; these myths generally exist in primitive society. They are also often connected to the magical and sacred things as well as rituals performed by the primitive society. As a matter of fact, myths exist and are believed not only by the primitive society, but also by the modern society. The modern people, especially who live in villages, still believe in the existence and the truth of the myths spread out among their society. Even though it is difficult to analyze and to observe the truth of the myths scientifically, some people still believe in the existence and the sanctity of the myths. To make the readers of this article understand about the definition and the meaning of myth, several views of experts quoted from several sources will be discussed in this article.

The word myth derives from Latin *mythus* or from Ancient Greek *mythos* or *muthos* that means stories or fable (folk tales). This term of myth in our language is sometimes defined as something false or imaginary. According to Nurcholis Madjid, mentioning something as a myth indicates that it has no values or it beckons the lowering of its values so that it does not have to maintain or believe in by human. In this sense, myth in his view has the same meaning as *takhayul* (in Arabic means fantasy), folk tales or superstitions.<sup>341</sup> However, myths are not merely folk tales or fairy tales, but also stories involving the deeds of gods, ancestors, spirits, and other supernatural beings. In short, myth is stories dealing with the activities and adventures of such supernatural beings. In this regard, description on myth stated by Mircea Eliade, as quoted by Jack David Eller, can be possibly one of our references on myth. Mircea Eliade states that:

<sup>339</sup> John R. Hinnells, (ed.), *The Dictionary of Religious*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984, 225

<sup>340</sup> Salomon Reinach, *Orpheus: A History of Religions*, London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1931, 1

<sup>341</sup> Nurcholis Madjid, *Islam Agama Peradaban, Membangun Makna dan Relevansi Doktrin Islam dalam Sejarah*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 2000, 174

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fable time of the beginnings. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. [. . .] Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the supernaturalness) of their works.<sup>342</sup>

Different from several experts’ views that the creators or authors of the myths are anonymous, Eliade’s view as quoted above states that myths are frequently creation or origin stories, in which spiritual or supernatural beings are the creators or originators. The myths tell us what transpired “in the beginning”—not always or necessarily in the beginning of time, but in the beginning of some particular fact or phenomenon, natural or social. As such, they are treated as *true* stories, an accurate account of events, by those who tell them.<sup>343</sup>

There is a general agreement among the ethnologists that myth deals with supernatural domain and super-sense of the reality, and refers to the prehistorical period. Based on this assumption, myth is defined by Galey on his work ‘*the Classic Myths in English Literatur and in Art*’, as quoted by David Badney, as ‘stories in which their origin are anonymous, which usual among the primitive people, and are received by them as ‘true’, dealing with supernatural beings and supernatural phenomena, or the natural phenomena and the beings that are influenced by supernatural agents.’<sup>344</sup> This conception, if we analyze it, connects myth to a story that has magical value and *supersensuous* believed as ‘true’ and be considered as something usual among the primitive society.

We can find many stories spread out both in primitive society and in our modern society. Some experts consider folk tales, myths, legends, fables, allegories, and other ones are similar. Dealing with this, Muller, a linguist, considers that myth as a story deals with gods, and he believes that the origin of all folk tales and fairy tales are myths that have blurred meaning because of the changes of language. Hence, he views that it is not necessary to separate myth from other kinds of stories or folk tales, but for one fact that myth is older than other stories.<sup>345</sup>

<sup>342</sup> Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion. Culture to the Ultimate*, N.Y. and London: Routledge, 83

<sup>343</sup> Ibid, 83-84

<sup>344</sup> David Badney, *Theoretical Anthropology*, N.Y.: Schocken Book, 1976, 1

<sup>345</sup> Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture. An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion*, N.Y: The Macmillan Company, 1968, 173



However, other experts consider that such all stories or folk tales are something different because each kind of stories has its own characteristics which are different. Boas, an anthropologist, finds difficulties to define the constraints of myth. He clearly describes that folk tales is undoubtedly classified as myth if such story tells the origin of the nature or the world, and if it can be told having been happened in the mythical period that is different from the period we live at present time.<sup>346</sup> Moreover, a problem appears when someone tries to differentiate between myth and folk tales because the same stories and same plots emerge in both of them.

To solve his confusion in differentiating both of these categories, i.e. myths and *folk tales*, Boas then tries to define 'mythological concepts' to differentiate both of these. According to him, to find the definition of mythological concepts is much easier than definition of the mythological tales. Mythological concepts are the fundamental views of the constitution of the world and its origin. These enter into tales relating to incidents in the lives of mythical beings, and into folk tales referring to the exploits and sufferings of our contemporaries, often of known individuals...in all these legends the mythological concepts appear as part and parcel of the tales.<sup>347</sup>

Based on Boas's view above, it can be concluded that the difference between myths and folk tales are that mythical tales are received or used seriously by the people (community) who believe in them, while folk tales are not considered or believed in seriously and they are used only for entertaining.

The criteria of the supernatural itself to differentiate the myth and other tales is actually not sufficient. The fairy tale about "sleeping beauty" describes seven supernatural beings, on a truth mirror, and on waking up from death. Nevertheless, it is clear that the dwarfs are not the sacred people, mirror is not the holy object, and the getting up of a beautiful girl does not mean raising her in the position of god. Fairy tales deal with all kinds of supernatural beings, both the good ones and the evil ones. However, such stories are not considered as the sacred or holy tales because they are not believed as 'true' by the adults. The belief gives the myths power. Without conviction, myths could not function as a 'charter of social reality'; they also could not strengthen or establish the moral values or motivate humans' behaviour. Conviction makes myths become sacred and directly relates them to dogma. Dogma pulls myths to explain and sacrifice their truth, and all tales that do not derive from dogma are not myth.<sup>348</sup>

However, myth is not only a symbolic description of dogma, but also all items of belief are expressed in mythical form. Myths are frequently defined by various references referring to belief systems that have cultural meaning, and they are able to justify the dominant social institutions. Folktales often contain moral messages, but they do not

<sup>346</sup> David Badney, *Theoretical...*, 290

<sup>347</sup> David Badney, *Theoretical...*, 290

<sup>348</sup> Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture...*, 186

build the value principles of the society even though they can reflect such a kind of values.

According to Seznec, as quoted by Malefijt, relativity of the dissemination of myths from one culture can be folktales for other cultures. Mythological inheritance of Ancient Greek, for example, has survived up to the present day in the West culture. These myths have spread out from generations to generations, long after they have their religious meaning. In transmission process, they maintain the art values in European literatures, and continually perform their functions, except the sacred function.<sup>349</sup>

Based on the above explanation, it is clear to demonstrate that a story is called a myth if it has the sacred element within it, and it is believed and considered 'true' by the society, or it is considered having ever been happened in the past. It means that stories or tales that have no the sacred values, or society considers them merely as fairy tales or entertaining tales, are not considered as myth. They are possibly regarded as folklore, folktales, or legends. Based on the above description, it can be concluded that at one period, a tale can be regarded as a myth by a certain society because of its sacred values and being considered as 'true story' by that society. However, on another period or on another culture, the tale is no longer considered as a myth because its sacred values have been faded or completely lost, and the society only considers them as a fiction that functions for entertaining only.

### **The Meaning, the Role and the Function of myth**

To understand the meaning, role, and the function of myth, we can approach it from different perspectives. Each perspective may result in different views on it. An anthropologist, for example, will analyze and observe the phenomenon of myth based on anthropological perspective. He will not judge whether myth is permitted or forbidden by the religious rules because it becomes the theologians' responsibility to express it. In this regard, Malefijt argues that 'myth consists of language; it appears in the form of a narrative with a plot; it has style and, often, beauty; it has a history and cross-cultural distribution; it is a cultural institution and, as such, possesses psychological, social, and religious functions and meanings. Thus, a linguist will analyze the language of myth; the folklorist is interested in its motifs and plots, the literary critic focuses on its style and aesthetic value, the psychologist searches for its emotional content, the theologian examines its relationship to religious truths, and the social scientist concentrates on its social and functions'.<sup>350</sup>

Many experts argue that human, both individually and collectively, could not live without any myth or mythology. It means that the existence of myth is very vital

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture...*, 172



and important, especially dealing with religious myth. The sociologists, especially anthropologists, try to explain and develop various interpretation, meaning, and the function of myth. According to them, myths are regarded as something needed by human to seek the intelligibility or the clarity about their realm as well as their origin history. Dealing with this, Roberts states that myths are stories or belief systems that help people understand the nature of the cosmos, the purpose and meaning of life, or the role and origin of evil and suffering.<sup>351</sup>

Myth, according to Malefijt, functions to create opinion and public identity and to strengthen the social solidarity. Malefijt states that myth is beautiful literature stories which have its own style, contain history, and play a great role in cross-cultural understanding. It contain cultural institutions. Hence, it has psychological, social, and religious functions and meaning so that the linguists, pshicologists, theologians, sociologists and anthropolgists are interested in studying it based on various perspectives and different method and approaches.<sup>352</sup>

Several communities where their people still believe in the sacred values of myths, myths function as a means to control their moral and behavior. Various examples of myths in Indonesia can possibly become a concrete sample how great the role, function, and meaning of myth in controlling behavior, attitude, and moral values of the society. The story of Malin Kundang from West-Sumatera, for example, contains moral values that want to be delivered by the author of myth to the people that they have to respect and love their parents, especially their mother. Deviation and violation on the moral values as implied by such a story will cause serious consequences for everybody who hurts his mother heart. In this story, Malin Kundang who has hurted his mother's heart was, then, condemned or sworn to be a stone. Other myths containing moral messages and moral values for human beings are spread out in every areas all over world, Banten is not exception. Dealing with this, we may quote Malinowski's opinion about the functions of myth based on his analysis on ideas, tradition, behaviours as well as typical culture of Melanesian society where he conducted a research. In his first paragraph og his work *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, Malinowski states that "*I propose how deeply the sacred tradition, the myth, enters into their pursuits, and how strongly it controls their moral and social behavior*".<sup>353</sup>

Myth play a great role in social life. Myth functions to create social solidarity of the society who posses it. With the existence of myth that they believe having the sacred and moral values transmitted from their ancestors for many generations, someone who leave his vilage to live in another region either temporarily or permanently will keep the

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture*...,177

<sup>353</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1955, 96.

sacred values and moral values of myths derived from his origin area. He will also will transmit it to his children and his generation in his new place. So that, when there is a ritual that should be performed dealing with the myth that he has obtained from his ancestors.

Malinowski's view in the following paragraph may possibly explain comprehensively how the function and the role of myth for the society is. He states that:

Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.<sup>354</sup>

Based on Malinowski's view above, it is clear to demonstrate that myth is not merely a told story, but a live reality. It is not a basic nature of fiction as we read in contemporary novels, but it is a live reality that is believed having ever existed in prehistoric period and continuously transmitted to influence the World and human. Furthermore, he also concludes that myth should not be subjected as merely an explanation or as a symbol, but on how myth motivates people and builds their life and their reality. Than being considered as a factual description, myth is a plan, a model, ( a 'model for' in a Geertz's term), or in Malinowski's term itself as a 'charter' or 'a live guidance'.<sup>355</sup>

### Kinds of Religious Myths in Banten

This part discusses several kinds of religious myths existed in the culture of Bantenese society. This classification is made based on the field data the writer collected in Banten.

#### ➤ The myth of the sacred and holy figures

Myths of the holy and sacred people who have died are probably the most typology of myths found in Banten. In almost every area in Banten is found various myths about the humans or figures who are considered having supernatural powers. The

<sup>354</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1955, 101

<sup>355</sup> Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 84-85

stories about their *barokah*, their charisma and their magical powers whether during their life or after their death, are still kept in the collective memory of the society. Their *barokah* and their supernatural powers are believed having been witnessed by several older people who lived when the figures lived. The stories of their *barokah* and their sacred are also frequently maintained and transmitted by the figures' offspring and disciples who still live at the present day. Because of such a belief and conviction, the cemeteries of the holy and sacred figures are often visited by many people both from inside Banten and outside Banten for many purposes to ask the *barokah* of the sacred figures for them.

For this kind of myth, the myth of *Wali Beji* or *Kyai Beji*, a sacred and holy saint who was buried in Kampung Terumbu, Serang, Banten, may be a good example. His name is popular for Bantenese society, especially for the Terumbu society, as a saint who was delegated by Sultan Hasanuddin to disseminate Islam to the Terumbu society at the Sultan Hasanuddin period. He was believed having got married with a daughter of an Islamic genie (*Jin Islam*) with a treaty that during their home life, *Wali Beji* might not see his wife cooking in the kitchen; on the contrary, his wife was also forbidden to take rice by herself in the rice barn. After 1 year marriage, they have a beautiful daughter. However, *Wali Beji* was, then, eager to know what his wife did during cooking. Therefore, when his wife was not in the kitchen, he went into the kitchen and opened the pan (a tool for cooking rice), and looked into the pan. Instantaneously, he was very surprised after he knew that what his wife cooked was not rice, but several stones. His wife, then, knew that her husband had broken their treaty. She was very sad. Furthermore, when her husband went out for fishing, she went into the rice barn to know what his husband had hidden. After a few minutes looking for something hidden by his husband in the rice barn, finally she could find her clothes that make her unable to return to heaven (*kayangan*). She, then, took her clothes and fled to the heaven as her origin place after entrusting her daughter to her servant.

When *Wali Beji* came from fishing, he was shocked because he couldn't find his wife at his house and leaving his daughter with his servant. He was, then, aware of his wrongness by breaking his agreement. Then, he decided to look for and to bring back his wife from the heaven. Because of his supernatural power, he could find his wife and bring his wife back after solving many hard magical obstacles during seeking his wife. After persuading his wife to return back (to descend) to the world, they finally could assemble to be a happy family with several children for many years.

During his life, *Wali Beji* was frequently asked to help people who came from both around his society and outside his society by using his magical power. Many people from many areas also always came to his house only for asking his *barokah*. After his death, his cemetery was frequently visited by many people for doing pilgrimage (*ziarah*), asking *barokah*, or hoping to get something magical for many

purposes. Nowadays, *Wali Beji's* offspring live near his cemetery and keep his cemetery. His offspring become charismatic figures in their society, and they obtain much respect from the society because they believe that *Wali Beji* was a holy saint who had spread Islam in this village.<sup>356</sup>

➤ The myths of the sacred places

In Banten. There are many sacred and holy places which are believed by both some Bantenese society and many people from outside Banten as places that can give them *barokah* and luckiness for their live. Because of this belief, these places are always crowded by many people who wanted to look for *barokah* and any magical science. One of the sacred places is Banten Lama where Sultan Hasanuddin (the first sultan of Banten Sultanate) and his family and his offspring are buried. Almost everyday, especially on Fridays, this place was always crowded of many people for performing *ziarah* for various purposes.

At another place in Banten, there are a myth of *Batu Qur'an* (the stone of Qur'an) and a myth of *Tujuh Sumur* (seven wells) that are believed as the sacred and the holy places. These places are also always visited by many people from inside and outside Banten for performing *ziarah*, asking *barokah*, seeking magical sciences, and so on. People believe in the story or myths about both of these places as something true and have ever been happened in the past. By performing *ziarah* to these places, they hope they succeed in obtaining their desire and hopes because of the *barokah* of these places.<sup>357</sup>

➤ The myths of supernatural animals

One of religious myths that is spread out in Banten is myths on supernatural animals. Some Bantenese people believe that several people, especially the sacred and holy people such as saints and kyai, and certain charismatic figures, had supernatural pets which always accompany them both during their life and after their death. Some people also believe that these magical animals will keep and protect their offsprings and will appear and show them selves at a certain time, especially when the people they protect need their help. Lions, tigers, and snakes are kinds of supernatural animals which are believed being possessed by certain people. The myths of these supernatural animals exists in almost every areas in Banten. One of the myths on supernatural animals is available in desa Ciomas, Serang Banten in which some of people in this village have ever witnessed a supernatural animal showing itself in the form of a big lion. They believed that this animal was K.H.Halimy's pet. K.H.Halimy was a charismatic ulama who established and lead a pesantren in this village. He was believed

<sup>356</sup> Interview with Ust. Munawir, one of offspring of *Wali Beji*, November 12th, 2010.

<sup>357</sup> Interview with Bpk. Katrin (45), Ds. Cipare Ranjeng, Serang Banten, October 13th 2011.

having *karomah* and several magical sciences as well as a supernatural animal which always accompany him both during his life and after his death.<sup>358</sup>

➤ The mythes of supernatural beings or spirits

Almost in every places, in every society and every culture in Indonesia is found myths on ghosts, spirits, evil spirits, the ancestors spirit, genies, and such a like. Stories on *wewe*, *dedemit*, *jintomang*, *buto ijo*, and other kinds of supernatural beings always appear in the society's gossips. Some of people believe that these supernatural beings can help or disturb human. Because of this belief, some people prefer visiting *kyai* (a religious figure) or *dukun* (traditional curer) to visiting doctors to cure their diseases when modern medicinal treatment or doctors could not cure their diseases.

➤ The myths of the sacred objects

In Banten, certain objects are often believed having magical power that can be used for practical purposes. Because of this belief, these magical objects are frequently hunted by certain people who like collecting magical objects because they believe that these objects will help them in solving their practical problems. *Kris*, *batu merah delima*, *many gajah*, *wafk*, *golok ciomas* (a kind of machetes from Ciomas), *batu cincin* (a stone ring) are some kinds of magical objects that are believed having magical powers collected by *dukun* or *ahli hikmat* and some other of Bantenese society. Golok Ciomas is a concrete example how people from both Bantenese society and other society believe in the myth of the sacred object that contain magical powers. This object is believed being possessed by certain people only. It is also made only in a special place, special days, and special time, special tools, and special ritual.

### How Bantenese People Understand and Believe in Religious Myths

Myths deal with something believed as sacred or holy. Hence, treatments toward something sacred are different from those of something profane. In doing socio-religious activities, there are certain ways that should be done by the people that should be appropriate with both the holy texts (the Qur'an) and the social norms and customs hold by the society. Moral values contained in religious myths are also frequently used to control their ritual and behavior.

When they are asked why they believed in the certain religious myths, some of Bantenese society generally argued that these myths were sacred stories they obtained from their parents and their ancestors. Hence, they believed that the religious myths that derived from their parents or ancestors must contain *hikmah* (wisdom). They worried something bad would be happened if they did not believe them. For them, the belief on

<sup>358</sup> Interview with Ibu Hayati, Kp. Masigit, Ds. Ciomas, Padarincang, Serang. Wawancara, August 20th, 2010.

religious myths was a part of their respectfulness to the spirits of their parents and their ancestors who had died. By believing these religious myths, they also hope they may get *barokah* and happiness for their life. According to them, our ancestors and our parents in the past were usually honest so that their words and their stories usually contain *hikmah* (wisdom) and contain good advices for human.

Even though the majority of the Bantenese society did not understand the reasons and rationalisation of the religious myths, the belief on the religious myths was still high in the society, especially for the older people who live in the villages. It was indicated from the fact that many people still visited several sacred places for doing *ziarah*, performing meditation and asceticism to reach their practical goals, and many people still maintained these for guiding their behaviour and their socio-religious activities. Indeed, some of them keep them in their mind and transmit them to their generations to maintain their social prestige.

### **The Position of Religious Myths among the Raising Genres of Popular Culture in Bantenese Society**

Apart from the lack of their understanding about the reasons and rasionalisation of the existence of the religious myths, the belief on this oral tradition is still alive among the culture of Bantenese society up to the present day. The raising genres of popular culture that develop rapidly among the society through all kinds of media that are easy to access by all society do not make this kind of myths lost and eliminated from Bantenese people's belief, at least, up to the present day.

The onslaught of popular culture, especially the West culture, that is frequently not appropriate with the norms, customs, moral and religious values of Indonesian people, less and more, have influenced the life style and behavior of our young generations. Many programs and information that show the West or Korean cultures that give priority to liberalism, consumerism, hedonism, free-sex, and other negative values are provided daily in all kinds of media such as internet, television, newspaper, novels, magazines, and so on. We can now witness the negative impacts of this popular culture in which many Bantenese people imitate various West styles. It influences all ages of Bantenese society, from children until the older people. They feel rightfully proud and more confident when they can act and dress as the West or Korean people. They no longer care whether it is appropriate with our religious and moral values or not. They worry if they do not act and dress like the modern people, they will be out of fashion.

Due to the rapid development of information technology and modern sciences that facilitates the access of information from all over the world throug internet and television in the future, it is something possible that this oral tradition will be left by the



Bantenese people. These religious myths will be lost from the collective memory of Bantenese society because they are eliminated by the modern and popular culture pervaded until the village societies.

### The Functions and Roles of Religious Myths for Bantenese Society

The existence of religious myths in Bantenese culture, to a certain degree, have influenced the socio-religious activities of the Bantenese society. Myths, in several cases, play a great role and have significant functions for Bantenese society.

Based on the data analysis to the religious myths spread out in Banten, there are at least four function and roles for socio-religious life of Bantenese:

➤ Religious myths functions to strengthen something

It means that religious myths function to strengthen the positive or negative images of someone or something. The myth of the magical power of *Golok Ciomas*, for example, may not only strengthen the images of the machete itself as one of traditional weapons of Bantenese heritages that become the local and national pride, but also strengthen the image of Ciomas people who are well known as rough, brave, stubborn, ill-fated and other negative images. This myth also strengthen the image of *jawara* (local strongman) who is popular as a group of people who are regarded as those who often performs unrest, has physical strength, aggressive, blunt attitudes, and supernatural powers. They also always take a *golok* (machete) tucked in their waist belt wherever they go. Many of *jawara* come from Ciomas.

➤ Religious myths functions to change something

It means that religious myths can change something that is initially profane becomes something sacred after it is told having supernatural power. In this case, several places in Banten such as the grave of *Raden Jayasantika* in the Kupak Mount in Banten are initially the profane places. However, someone then created a myth on the supernatural power of these places and tell it to other people so that many people believe in it. When many people believe in the myth, these places are, then, frequently visited by many people who hope the *barokah* from these places. Their arrival may change the condition of these places, and their society can take benefits from these religious myths socially or economically.

➤ Religious myths functions to maintain cultural identity and social solidarity

Myths often evoke the same emotional feeling among the society. People who come from the same area or the same village and have the same religious myths that are believed by all of the society, will maintain their solidarity among them wherever they live. Indeed, when they have moved to another village or another region, they will keep

and believe in their religious myths that they have and get from their origin village. They also tell and transmit their origin religious myths to their generations in their new places as a form of social solidarity toward villages where they were born and grew. These religious myths also frequently become identity symbol of their origin. The Bantenese, especially, generally do not want change their identity as a Bantenese even though they no longer live in Banten.

➤ Religious myths function to it maintain the prestige and social status

For some of Bantenese society, the existence of religious myths, especially myths of the origin of their villages and the myths of the sacred figures who become their ancestors, are considered having certain values for them. It is often happened that people who become the offspring of the sacred and holy figures, especially the offspring of charismatic and sacred figures who had islamized or converted the society into Islam in the past, obtain great respect and higher appreciation as well as higher position and social status among the society. This condition can be found in *desa Terumbu Serang Banten* where the offspring of *Wali Beji* is regarded as honourable people and obtain higher social prestige and social status in the society.

## Conclusion

Religious myths are one of the treasures of oral tradition that is spread out and still survive in every culture and every society all over the world, and Banten is not an exception. This belief on these religious myths frequently relates to something sacred or holy and deals with supernatural beings that is difficult to understand by our logical reasons. Tehy are also difficult to be proven scientifically and their creators are anonymous. Religious myths are regarded containing moral values. Hence, one of their functions is to maintain moral and behaviour of the society.

Moreover, the belief and conviction to these religious myths can show that modernity and the rapid development of sciences and information technology can not immediately erode and eliminate the mystical and magical dimensions of the modern society's thought and behaviour. It is indicated by the fact that the belief on these religious myths are believed and practiced not only by the common people, but also by educated people.

Various religious myths are spread out, still believed, and transmitted from generations to generations among the Bantenese society. Many events and socio-religious activities of Bantenese society are often covered by religious myths. The raising genres of popular culture that develop rapidly among the society through all

kinds of media that are easy to access by all society do not make this kind of myths are lost and eliminated from Bantenese people's belief, at least, up to the present day.

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